'LET'S TRY AND SET THE RECORD STRAIGHT'

RADIOHEAD'S **THOM YORKE** HAS REFUSED TO SPEAK TO **NME** FOR FIVE YEARS. NOW, ANNOUNCING "ENOUGH'S ENOUGH", IT IS, HE SAYS, TIME TO TELL IT LIKE IT REALLY IS

TEXT: SYLVIA PATTERSON

Thom Yorke peers up the wooden stairway into the Interview Room in a recess of his management office. Fuck it, he thinks, it's dark up there.

"Come on," he says, grabbing a seat, "let's go out in the sun." And so it came to pass that Thom Yorke and *NME*, his sworn 'enemy', came to be seated in a courtyard in deepest, leafiest Oxfordshire, sun overhead, birds a-tweet, drinking tea, chortling, like bosom buddies back from the Critical Wars. For, ooh, all of about 12 seconds.

It's been a mess, all this, for years. It's been personal, bitter and childish (as is 'our' wont), *NME*'s dismissal of early Radiohead as "lily-livered" and "miserable", even through 'The Bends', photographs captioned with the words "ugly ugly ugly", the band eschewed over the glamorous posturing of Suede, a five-year Mexican stand-off over coverage worsening the more 'important' Radiohead became. But that's all over now. Perched on the seat on the concrete courtyard, Thom Yorke has flung off his fluorescent orange camping-chic cagoule and wears an ancient, plain grey T-shirt, jeans, and fawn shoes in the shape of a parallelogram. Scratching at several days' beard growth, he's wearing his shades; big, angular, frameless, burgundy-tint, spook-shaped numbers and you come, eventually, to realise absolutely everything about Thom Yorke is a funny shape. He can swing from profound amusement to profound offence in the space of the same sentence and owns a huge, nasal laugh – broken teeth everywhere – made from sarcasm itself. A tiny, edgy person, he's so far beyond edgy to actually be The Edge. The other Edge. The real Edge. So, comparable only to Morrissey coming back from the 'dead', Thom's ready to have his say. Like... why?

"Hmn," says Thom, and there follows the first of today's colossal pauses in which he looks directly at the ground.

"I just got sick of holding grudges basically," he says, eventually, birds still a-tweet. "Enough's enough. Erm. *(Tweet tweet)* Not least because the people involved have all left. Anyway, I'm doing *NME* a favour. Fattening themselves up for floating themselves on the international money market and no doubt this will help, because I'm a name. *(Monumental derision) NME*-dot-com. More bullshit per second than... whatever."

The sun goes in. Already. Thom takes his shades off immediately.

Why be 'party' to any of this, then?

"Because otherwise they just make loads of shit up," he states. "So... enough shit. That's all. It's like talking to CNN, innit? Neheheh! Generally though, I just got pissed off a little bit with what happened on 'Kid A' and thought, OK, let's try and set the record straight. Slightly."

Good. So that's ENOUGH of all THAT.

The world's reaction to the apparent anti-media, anti-fame, anti-success, anti-fan, anti-rock'n'roll *volte-face* of 'Kid A' (and now parts of 'Amnesiac', their fifth LP) is something Thom Yorke does not understand. It makes him, frankly, furious. After '97's 'OK Computer' and its official title as The Era-Defining Album Of The Decade, Radiohead wanted to do things 'differently', on every level, including not-playing-the-game and, naturally, the games masters doled out the punishment. Nonetheless, it was Number One across planet Earth anyway.

"Aaall it was," he's stressing, "was claiming the ability to go off in whatever direction we chose, in order for it to be a vital and interesting thing for us to do. Instead of repeating the formula endlessly and making loads of wonga."

The mythology remains it was a reaction to oppressive reverence. It's the rock'n'roll lexicon, the reverence arrives and...

"The Reverend?" chokes Thom. "Reverend, will you stop coming?"

So there's The Reverend standing at the Best Band In The World crossroads, and you take the fork marked, 'Avant Garde...'

"If you're accused of being morbid or bleak then you're onto a good thing, I'd say. 'Cos our culture is fucking desperate – desperately trying to avoid anything vaguely depressing."

"Oh yeah," he withers, "get in the Range Rover and down the off-road. Well, yeah, it does happen with most bands. But! The point is, as far as we're concerned and this is absolutely true, we weren't being avant garde, I don't think it's avant garde at all. If there'd been any conscious deliberate attempt to be like that, it would've just sucked like a fucking big massive stinky one. But I don't think it does."

For Thom, it was a question of 'influences'. During 'OK Computer' they were listening to "Morricone", and during 'Kid A' and 'Amnesiac' it was "Mingus" *(Charles, the jazz-toff's Jesus)* and "electronic" whizzery.

"Guitar music just wasn't turning it on for us," he adds. "Kind of miss it now."

It's your own fault anyway. You articulated big things with 'OK Computer' and therefore were seen to shun your 'responsibility' by not saying anything at all.

"Well, from my point of view," he baulks, "these two records say far more of relevance and importance than 'OK Computer' did. 'OK Computer' was like flicking channels on the TV and this is... um... that's a shame. I think that's a real shame people would think that. And who the fuck is going to want to sit down and write a bunch of words that that's gonna happen to? Nobody. You'd end up having some sort of bizarre critical house party going on in your head. But I absolutely don't think that's true at all. I absolutely think the exact opposite is true."

So what exactly are you 'saying' with these records?

And here, being actually halfway through our conversation, the tape recorder goes click.

"Ha ha ha!" guffaws Thom, delighted. "Tape's run out! Thank fuck!"

And he leaps off the seat, straight into the office for a lengthy drink of water, returning to say, unequivocally, "Next". Legendarily hopeless at analysis of either himself or his music, Thom's aversion to the microphone is the same as any 'artist' – pull the fibres apart and you've killed the magic – though he'll manage, eventually, to say of both 'Kid A' and 'Amnesiac', "there's an unhealthy obsession with death going on, and also the absolute opposite of hopeless". In other words, it's also about staying alive.

After 'OK Computer', Thom stopped reading what the world wrote about him because, to use his favourite phrase, it "did my head in". But, sometimes, the odd sentence slipped through "by accident".

Let's talk about what some of the fans said. There was a hoo-haa in the *NME* letters page at the time.

"Oh goody."

There were things about cop-out, about selling your art short.

"Mnm. Hmmn."

Things about being reluctant to commit yourself emotionally.

And here, like a man being shot in the chest, Thom Yorke throws his head straight back in a flip-top head of genuine hysteria.

"Ahahahahargh!" he bellows, inexplicably, snorting everywhere. "Ahahahahargh! *(Begins clapping furiously)* Hurghurghurgh! Fuck you, you silly cow! Person! Whoever you are! Fuck you entirely! Get out of my face and stay there forever! That just deserves a great big 'fuck you'!"

Christ almighty... evidently so!

"Absolutely!" he booms. "It's not even worthy of a response! I'm not even gonna commit myself emotionally to a response! Next!"

Thom Yorke, 32, is a weirdo, alright. You could touch a live, raw nerve standing in a different country altogether. He's the most unfathomable man in all music, the living embodiment of the word contrary. He's an olden days rock star, beamed from the moons of Jupiter, from a time when 'weirdo' was what rock star meant. Rock'n'roll: invented by weirdos, for weirdos, for the spectacular weirdness of life. Think of a Great, any Great, and you think of an Alien, the extreme, 'ugly', natural outsider which rock'n'roll turns to 'beautiful'. Thom's one of them. He's Proper. He's also one of the least 'miserable' men alive. 'Miserable' is not the same thing as 'bloody livid'. His most loathed word ever is "angst; well obviously I would hate that word, but I do hate that word. Existential angst. *(Blows enormous raspberry, tongue out)* Pthlthlth!" His very DNA is made out of indignation, bilious contempt and attitude. In other words, he's a punk rocker. We've met once before, four months ago, Thom again eschewing his 'no interviews' policy to talk to *The Big Issue*. In a considerably less charged atmosphere than the one we're in today, he decided he wasn't a punk at all.

"Oh, I'm a hippy," he said, "I haven't got the balls to be a punk."

Sometimes, the world makes him literally ill and sometimes his own head makes him literally ill. Prone to extreme thinking-too-much-syndrome ("I'd say, about most things, whoooo!"), he's a "shameless dabbler" in Buddhism. He's read *The Tibetan Book Of The Dead* and it sent him bonkers, couldn't finish it, "it freaked the living crap out of me, absolutely." Now he's thinking about 'Amnesiac' and how he couldn't possibly compare it to anything else Radiohead have ever done.

"I can't think of it like that," he quakes, "that'd make me ill."

People may have been expecting the 'real' album...

"Oh yeah, yeah, yeah," he snorts, having heard that one before, "well maybe that's good in a way."

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Maybe not. Because it's known as 'Kid B' already.

"Yeah," he hoots, "in a hurry. Neheheh!!"

Some of 'Amnesiac' is phenomenal; panoramic space-rock echoing The Beta Band ('Packt Like Sardines In A Crushd Tin Box' about "the road rage psycho from hell"), olde Radiohead through a vocal echo chamber ('You And Whose Army?'), Thom fronting The Smiths ('Knives Out' – "Ed played it to Johnny Marr," grins Thom, "and he went, 'Yeah!'. It's a humble interpretation, everyone's influenced by everyone else, just depends who's on the radio"), The Stone Roses' 'Zeppelin' era ('I Might Be Wrong') and pre-'The' Verve ('Dollars & Cents').

Just as it's mounting into a colossal groove of wigs-askew might, however, it implodes into a sparse-beat, digital abyss, waving goodbye over a meander of pesky trumpeting from jazz giant Humphrey Lyttleton. "Mingus", right enough. Where Thom's voice is truly Back, though, it remains the most soulful, elevational soundwave in rock'n'roll today. 'Pyramid Song', the first single, with epic, world-under-water video animation from new arts collective Shynola, is a meditation, surely, on the impending global Apocalypse. (the visuals inspired by one of Thom's dreams). Ultimately, it's not 'Kid B' at all. It's 'Dad A'.

"The reason you create music or art or write is in order to put things in a way you can possibly deal with it," says Thom, emphatically. "And death is one of those areas. *(Becoming annoyed)* But we don't seem to spend much time with it, do we? If you're accused of being morbid or bleak then you're onto a good thing, I'd say. 'Cos our culture is the most fucking desperate culture desperately trying to avoid anything vaguely depressing which is alarming because what's the result? Well we all know what that is, don't we? We're at a time when we are being presented with undeniable changes in the global climate and fundamental issues that effect every single one of us, and it's the time we're listening to the most hokey shite on the radio and watching vacuous bullshit celebrities being vacuous bullshit celebrities and desperately trying to forget about everything. Which is fine, you know, but personally speaking, I can't do that. With what I do. It's not even to do with necessarily taking yourself seriously, it's just to do with, 'Well, no, I think we use music as a way of turning bad energy into good energy'. *(Laughs ruefully)* Or making something out of inexpressible emotion, which could be useful."

The most stunningly emotive song on 'Amnesiac' is 'Knives Out', played live at last year's sonically perfect No Logo tent shows and interpreted, with its melodic chorus, *"look into my eyes, I'm not coming back"*, as a 'goodbye' to the music industry.

"Not at all," says Thom, naturally. "It's partly the idea of the businessman walking out on his wife and kids and never coming back. It's also the thousand yard stare when you look at someone close to you and you know they're gonna die. It's like a shadow over them, or the way they look straight through you. The shine goes out of their eyes."

Who have you seen that in the eyes of?

"(Huge pause, colossally penetrating stare straight into the soul) A few people."

Did it really take 373 days to record these songs?

"Probably, yeah."

That's idiotic.

"I'd say! Fuck me!" he nods. "We just lost our nerve. It was so straight-ahead. We thought, 'We've gotta put that in the bin, it's too straight'. We couldn't possibly do anything that straight until we'd gone and been completely arse about face with everything else. In order to feel good about doing something straight like that. It took 373 days to be arse-about-face enough to realise it was alright the way it was."

You could call that the scenic route.

"Yeah," he guffaws, "permanently on the scenic route. You've got to be! If you don't take the scenic route how you gonna see the view?"

The 18-month recording session which produced 'Kid A' and 'Amnesiac' nearly split Radiohead up. They nearly split up over the running orders alone. In between the writer's block, the crisis of confidence, the artistic confusion, six people, including producer Nigel Godrich, "pulling in different directions", there were "crisis meetings", each member individually thinking, "why are we doing this?" Along the way, says Thom, "I shut a few doors, had to tell a few people to shut up." A whirlpool of dementia, then, which

"Things started to get pretty unpleasant. And pretty personal. And I'm not particularly tough."

came directly after Thom's post-'OK Computer' 'meltdown'. Fame, global success, The Reverend and The Machine all brought him to the brink of insanity. His was "sucked in ways that fucked me up for years afterwards, and nobody is coming close to me with that shit again". He took to drawing hawthorn hedges near his home in Oxford because they reminded him of a human brain. He spent "the whole of '99" obsessed with humanity's wilful slide into Apocalyptic horror and, simultaneously, the white-hot hell of self-consciousness, which afflicts "people like me". 'Kid A' and 'Amnesiac', you could say, saved his soul (he'd never say it himself).

"I just needed to sort myself out, really," he says, plainly, "and um... *(Panoramic pause)* I just don't have... insanity is something different. This was more... I just absorb things very quickly."

Can you describe what Fame Madness felt like?

"Well there was lots of bullshit involved," he says, "that ends up feeling eventually like it's real and then you have to go away and tell the difference. You actually start believing your own bullshit. Like John Cleese said on *Parkinson*, 'I can only do about three weeks' promo because after a while I start to feel less like I'm really human, just a little bit... false'. You talk for so long it gets a bit... funny. And people were throwing things like that *NME* letter at me a lot. Things started to get pretty unpleasant. And pretty personal. And I'm not... particularly tough. And not particularly adept at dealing with personal attacks. Which is my own fault for choosing such a stupid thing to do. It is. It's true."

Do you lack a second skin? That's what the Manics used to say about Richey.

"Hmn. I dunno. Most things are fine but things do get through still. If someone came up to me and said what that letter said in a pub I would be really upset."

It really bothers you that much?

"I would be really, really upset."

You need a psychic shield, you do.

"Um... yeah."

Everyone needs a psychic shield. Otherwise too much of the world gets in and you've had it.

"Everyone needs a psychic shield," he ponders. "That's true, actually. I think that is true. Well, I'm lucky because my friends do look out for me. But it's weird when, by definition, your motives are doubted. And that's what was happening. And if you're not very tough it can sort of... do your head in. Really."

You'd be tempted to ask him why he still makes music, when all around, people like Sharleen out of Texas, go on record as saying of the New Radiohead, "if you want to make records for yourself then fuck off back to your bedroom".

Why d'you still do it, Thom?

A full 19 seconds pass. Three generations of tweetsome birds are born, set their children free, and die overhead.

"Personally speaking, I have to use music to sort things out. Because that's what I do."

Thom's witnessed the international media conspiracy of "hokey shite" up close. He saw it in Cologne, as part of the Jubilee 2000 campaign to drop the Third World debt, delivering several million signatures on a petition and being "bullied" by security down the side entrance, making sure "there would be no front pages of Bono and his cronies handing it in". That day, in the City Of London, the Reclaim The Streets protest ended in violence – "I don't know why but we know what the Socialist Workers Party are like, don't we?" – and Thom watched the coverage, next day, in Britain.

"And the protest had been all lumped together *(with Jubilee 2000)*," he fumes. "All these pretty respectable-looking, middle-class people in Cologne, tens of thousands of them, are being associated by the fucking BBC, even by Channel 4, as somehow part of this violence in the City Of London. Something that I thought was pretty cardigan-wearing and so on was actually turning out to be, as far as the mainstream media was concerned, unfortunate, radical and naive. And not one motherf—er among them talking about the issue of debt. Not one. Not one motherf—er. Not one. All they had was the chintzy photo of

"That's it, I'm off!" Thom Yorke, approximately one hour after meeting NME

Bono shaking hands with Blair and Bob Geldof. It just fucking blew my mind."

He fumes some more.

"I know some stuff about MI5 that would shit your... brain. Mmm. But I can't tell you. 'Cos they'll do it to me, too. Seriously. And I'm not winding you up, either."

Are you on 'file'?

"Oh no, it's nothing to do with me. No, seriously. Put it this way: last year at the May Day protests, there were policemen with bullet-proof jackets and machine guns, and a photographer with a bullet-proof jacket, walking through the crowd taking photographs of all the main people and putting them on file. That's all you need to know."

Almost as paranoiac a conspiracy theorist/realist as the Wu-Tang Clan, Thom doesn't see ver meeja as the perpetrator of a pan-global conspiracy of cultural stupidity. It's more banal than that, and possibly even worse.

"It seems to be less about a conspiratorial agenda," he surmises, "and more to do with not wanting to spend any money doing any decent research. They don't pay journalists properly, they're not interested, they want the cheap stories that the PRs fish out for 'em. Everything's exactly the same as everything else."

The perception of Thom as part of the lineage of Spokesmen For Rock's Conscience, naturally, he deplores. His involvement with Amnesty, Jubilee 2000 and the Free Tibet movement are motivated, he notes, by "common sense"; he certainly doesn't care "how stupid I look" and is merely appalled the world is run by "a bunch of old miserable motherf—ing economists". The Radiohead website, radiohead.com, features an address page of politicised 'links', from Drop The Debt, to Indymedia to CorpWatch. Perusing this page, some days after we meet, it features a 'hidden message' from Thom, accessed through the high-light option, which reads "RECKON I MAYBE DESERVE A FILE AT MI5 NOW TONY WHAT DO YOU THINK?" Bizarre. And possibly steeped in sarcasm.

"A quarter of a million people come through the site every month," he says, "and maybe one or two will be curious and go and have a look. They don't have to believe it, – who's saying we always believe it? – the point is just having access to other sources of information. You're not gonna get the other side of the story most of the time."

D'you think it's your 'duty' to utilise your position? Your power?

"I've just got a massive interest in the way the global economy works," he shrugs. "There's some people who actually work; I don't do anything; I just shoot my mouth off and get into trouble, really. That's bugger all."

Where does your compulsion come from to Make A Difference?

"Oh, definitely guilt," he says, immediately, "definitely guilt. It's all just guilt, basically. I just feel really sorry for meself."

I really don't understand that.

"What?"

Why guilt's such a force in your life.

"I was joking *(rolls eyes heavenwards)*."

You've talked about guilt in all seriousness before.

"When?"

To me! Four months ago!

"Oh really!? Bugger. Harghargh!"

Sometime last year, Thom remarked that "guilt" was "the most destructive force" driving him throughout his life. Four months ago, I asked what this guilt was over.

"I've had a very privileged upbringing," he said, a man who studied Art and English at "ultra-ultra competitive" Exeter University. "I've had a very expensive education. And it took me years to come to terms with that. A long, long, long time."

He also said he knew nothing about anything.

"I haven't got a clue, same as everyone else," he mused. "I write songs called 'Everything In Its Right Place'. I want a nice, clean world that makes sense."

In the beginning, he was, he said, "very ambitious". Over the years, ambitions realised, his head became "done in".

"Ambitious for what?" he wrestled out loud, "what for? I thought when I got to where I wanted to be everything would be different. I'd be somewhere else. I thought it'd be all white fiuffy clouds. And then I got there. And I'm still here."

Why, in the end, have you done what you've done?

"It's filling the hole," he said, unapologetically, "that's all anyone does."

What happens to the hole?

"(Transatlantic pause) It's still there."

Maybe it just changes shape, eh?

"Yeah. It changes shape. And now... heh heh heh... now it's a triangle."

Today, of course, he might tell you all of the above is "bollocks". But middle-class white guilt doesn't explain a thing. Thom jokes about it because it's the perennial rock'n'roll 'class' cliché bar none. He's heard it all before; how Radiohead are world-class hypocrites from Hades because they're now millionaires and still signed to EMI, the schmindie-mentality bogey-man from 1843. We've more multi-millionaires in music today than ever before, and everywhere else for that matter, and few give the world's ills a second's contemplation. Very very few truly Give A Shit.

"Oh I think they do," insists Thom, back under the birds. "Oh, I dunno. Fuck. I don't know. I don't know!"

"I'm not taking things quite so seriously as before. Especially myself. I'm not!"

This year, Thom's become a family man, with a house in Dorset and a son called, biblically enough, Noah. In June, Radiohead bring us their personal festival, the Oxford 'South Park' show and thereafter tour America, with The Beta Band, for the obvious reason, "they're good". What Radiohead do next is anyone's guess, the only clue being that he "misses" the sound of guitars. Whatever it is, it won't be whatever we think it is. Meanwhile, he'll carry on, being heroically uncool, opposing the hopeless forces of cynicism.

"The sad thing is," he contemplates, "if an issue is laughed at and patronised by mainstream media then it's up against it big-time. I read some journalist recently lecturing the anti-globalisation lobby saying, 'This is the way capitalism works, all capitalism is exploitation and to make it try and do something else, it's never gonna happen'. And it's like, 'Yeah, but where does that leave us? This is somehow God's will? All this? It's God's will that we sit in traffic? It's God's will that millions of people are gonna die this year because of some out-moded economic policies?' No it's not! It's like some deranged sacrificial altar, the High Priests of the global economy holding up these millions of children each year, like *(arms aloft)*, 'We wish to please you! Oh Gods of free trade!' It's like... give us all a fucking break!"

The devil at work?

"If there is a devil at work," says Thom, academically, "then he rests in institutions and not in individuals. Because the beauty of institutions is that any individual can abdicate responsibility. The assumption that we're all utterly powerless, that's the devil at work."

And here, his signature wonky eyes align to become exactly the same, as they always do when he profoundly means-it, man. It's the singularly most bizarre thing about the wholly bizarre Thom Yorke. He looks at the tape recorder and uncannily detects when one hour to the second is up.

"Right! One last question! A little one."

Fatherhood, then. Best thing that's ever happened to you?

"All those corny things," he smiles, "put it this way, I'm not taking things quite so seriously as before. Especially myself."

Pthrt!

"I'm not! Because I don't have the time. I'm not throwing my toys out of the cot any more, he's doing it for me. There'll be lots of corny songs about children now. Or maybe I've already sung 'em, you never know, in all those hidden lyrics. Heheheh!"

And he's off, leaping into a big, curvy, grey-green car, zooming away from the madness, a remarkable man with wonky eyes in spooky shoes and a hole in his soul in the shape of a 'funny' triangle. For Thom Yorke, perhaps, the answer to Everything is becoming ever simpler: we can either stay here in the dark, or we can walk out in the sun. If he's the last of his kind, as Radiohead's 'miserable' sleevenotes might have it, we've only got ourselves to blame, and we know it.

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